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ABSTRACT

To gather information on parent preferences regarding the type of information communicated by schools to families, a survey was distributed to 444 middle and upper-middle class parents in Michigan. The survey divided techniques used by schools to communicate with the community into five categories: information about classroom curricula, student information, school activities, parent information, and administrative information. Parents were asked to rank each technique in order of importance and then to rank the five categories. Results of the study, based on responses from 114 families, included the following: (1) with respect to classroom curricula, the information identified as most important was a list of expected student outcomes for the year; (2) the student information rated most important was the extent of student progress, while comparison with other students was rated least important; (3) a calendar was considered the most important technique related to school activities; (4) with respect to parent information, how parents could help at home was the highest ranked technique; (5) for administrative information, notice of major policy decisions was the most important type of information; and (6) while many respondents thought all the categories were important, student information was the highest rated type of information, and administrative information was rated lowest. (Contains 13 references.) (BCY)

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School-Home Communications:

A Qualitative Survey

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School-Home Communication: A Qualitative Survey

Literature on School-Home Communication

Research indicates that there are several benefits to parent involvement through home-school communications. There seems to be general agreement that parent involvement can have an effect on student achievement and that parent involvement can take many forms of which one is school-home communications (Massachusetts State Department of Education, 1990; Epstein, 1987; Herman & Yeh, 1980). Truby (1987), Herman, and Yeh (1980) report that a planned program of school-home communication did increase parent involvement and participation. The Center for Social Organization of Schools (1983) surveyed 600 elementary schools. The Center reported that the use of parent involvement results in greater feelings of parent involvement and greater recognition of the efforts and merits of teachers. Pawlus (1985) contends that increased parent involvement could positively impact the level of support for the school.

Several techniques have been reported in various surveys of school-home communications. Several researchers (Truby, 1987; Purnell & Gotts, 1983; and Barclay, 1977) report that written and personal

communications with parents were identified as one potentially effective mechanism. The Center for Social Organization of Schools (1983) reported that of the 14 techniques surveyed, most teachers used 3 of these techniques: (1) having parents read to their children, (2) requesting that parents take children to the library, and (3) sending books and teaching materials home to be used by parents.

Need

Although various studies recommend parent involvement programs that include a quantity of school-home communications, none of the studies found in an U.S. Department of Education (ERIC) database search with the descriptors of parent communication, parent school relationship, and parent involvement, dealt with the qualitative aspects of school-home communications. In other words, what were the most important types of home-school communications?

Barclay (1977) in an NEA publication asserted that parents want to receive information on major administrative and policy decisions, the financial status of the school, special problems facing the school, and opportunities for meaningful involvement and input. Notice that nothing is mentioned about

communications about the pupil. Given the limited amount of time and resources available to teachers and administrators, we decided to ask parents which types of information in school-home communications were most important.

Survey

A survey was developed using communication techniques found in the literature and parent interviews. Drafts of the survey were reviewed by the faculty of Amerman Elementary School and a parent subcommittee of the PTA. After several drafts and suggestions, a survey was developed dividing the various communication techniques into five categories: classroom curriculum, student information, school activities, parent information, and administrative information. Parents were then asked to rank order the techniques in each category. Following this, parents were then asked to rank order the various categories.

Amerman Elementary School is one of four elementary schools in Northville Public Schools in Northville, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Northville would probably be described as a middle and upper-middle class community. The survey was distributed to

444 families. The return rate for the survey was 114, or 25.7%.

Results

Table 1 shows the average rankings from respondents and are listed in rank order by result. An examination of the table will quickly show the reader what the respondents in this survey indicated was the most important information to receive from school in the various categories. It is interesting to note in terms of the rankings and in the category of student information, that these parent respondents want to know: first, whether they are making progress; second, their student's competencies; third, how they are doing in subject areas; fourth, areas needing improvement; fifth, how they are improving; and sixth, student strengths. Mixed in with these rankings was a desire for notification if there is a problem. Notice that parent respondents wanted to know not only how their student was doing, but in specific terms of what they were learning. Compare this with the distant rankings of student attitudes, cooperation, grades, and comparisons with others.

The last section of the survey asked respondents to rank order the various sections of the survey. The

mean ranking responses seems to indicate that the most important information according to parent respondents was those dealing with student information (1.38) and classroom curriculum (1.42). There was almost a one point gap between these two types of information and the last three: parent information (2.4), school activities (2.59), and administrative information (2.93) .

Insert Table 1 about here.

It should be noted that several parents found the task of ranking types of information very difficult. Several wrote at the bottom of the survey that all types were important.

Summary

While this survey has several scientific limitations, it begins to answer the question as to what type of information is most important. It is a beginning for parents to begin to analyze the type of information they receive. For administrators and teachers with limited time and resources, these results may help to begin the process to prioritize their

school-home communications in order to qualitatively improve parent involvement.

Table 1

Survey Results and Respondents Rankings
of School-Home Information by Category

Rankings by Response	Mean Ranking	Type of Information
Classroom Curriculum		
1	2.49	A listing of expected and essential student outcomes for the year.
2	2.6	Concepts covered in each subject.
3	2.82	Educational philosophy of teacher.
4	2.85	Activities and events in classroom.
Student Information		
1	4.29	Whether students are making progress.
2	4.97	How students are doing in terms of a student's competencies.
3	4.88	Notification if there is a problem.
4	5.27	How students are doing in class in subject areas.
5	5.38	How students are doing in terms of areas needing improvement.
6	5.84	How students are doing in terms of improvement.
7	6.86	Student strengths.
8	7.65	Student attitude about school.
9	7.87	Parent awareness if student is in danger of a poor grade.
10	8.14	Results of tests.
11	8.31	Whether students are cooperating.
12	8.92	Whether students are getting along with others.
13	9.07	How students are doing in terms of grades.
14	11.7	How a student compares with others.
School Activities		
1	1.38	Calendar of activities.
2	1.69	Monthly update on school events.

Table 1 (Continued)

Survey Results and Respondents Rankings
of School-Home Information by Category

Rankings by Response	Mean Ranking	Type of Information
Parent Information		
1	1.66	How parents could help students at home.
2	2.56	Opportunities for parent involvement in decisions.
3	2.96	Explaining activities that parents might not understand.
4	3.3	Political information about legislation that could affect school.
5	3.98	Information, help, or classes about parenting and discipline.
Administrative Information		
1	1.51	Major administrative & policy decisions.
2	1.85	Special problems facing the schools.
3	2.47	The financial status of school.

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